INTEROPERABILITY

DEC Promised that the Architecture's in the Mail

I was recently in the Digital Bookstore in Silicon Valley looking for information on DECnet/OSI Phase V. Pretty slim pickings. As I was checking out at the cashier's desk, I asked if it was possible to get more information on Phase V. No luck.

A little history. DECnet Phase V was going to be the big DEC move from proprietary networking into the world of open systems. It was announced several years ago with great fanfare. Everybody was expecting a nice rollout at each DECworld trade show in the late '80s. With each DECworld, however, there was silence.

What happened shows the pitfalls of grandiose architectures that try to solve all problems at once. DEC just couldn't handle it. And if DEC's Networks Group, with some of the best network programmers around, can't handle it, there needs to be some rethinking.

DEC did just that. The company retrenched and started thinking about incremental steps. Instead of a grand unveiling we saw some pieces that were Open Systems Interconnection-like come out for DEC's version of Unix, known as the Ultrix platform; there was a name service under open systems that went into the Open Software Foundation's Distributed Computer Environment components. And, we are slowly seeing the rest come out.

ACKNOWLEDGING MISTAKES

Of course, DEC is not the kind of company that likes to admit failure. Instead of telling its customers that things weren't happening right, troops of marketing representatives started doing things like changing the name. How has "Advantage Networks" grabbed you as a replacement?

The DECnet/OSI Phase V fiasco spells the end of the grandiose architecture. IBM learned the same lesson when its Systems Application Architecture took years to become nothing.

This doesn't mean that things like IBM's SAA or DEC's Network Application Support don't play a valuable role. They are philosophies of computing. They tell us how the company thinks about computers.

What they don't do, however, is provide a basis for short-term product decisions by the engineers. When it comes to real products, a more productive approach—for users and manufacturers alike—is incremental.

Key pieces of DECnet/OSI have survived. DEC is one of the leaders in providing dynamic routing protocols. Likewise with areas like dynamic host configuration. When DEC lets the engineers and architects pioneer in areas like this, they lead the market. When the company lets marketing take over, there are large-scale fiascos.

The failure of DECnet/OSI Phase V was a marketing failure. Good communication with the customer base about engineering difficulty would have given DEC a few black eyes, but it would have maintained credibility. Instead, a xenophobic approach to marketing communications meant that DECnet/OSI Phase V became a failure instead of a realization that a different strategy was more appropriate.

CARL MALAMUD, A WRITER AND CONSULTANT, HAS JUST HAD PUBLISHED 'STACKS: INTEROPERABILITY IN TODAY'S COMPUTER NETWORKS' (PRENTICE HALL, 1991). THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED ARE HIS OWN.

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